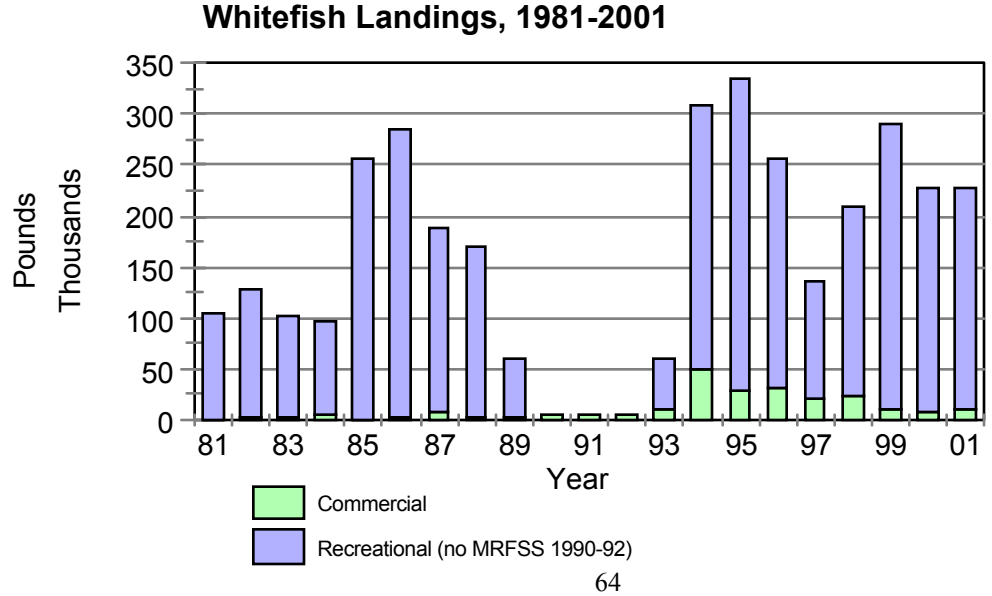
Ocean Whitefish (*Caulolatilus princes*)

Status of the Population:

The status of the population of ocean whitefish off California, and throughout the center of the population to the south of California, is generally unknown. Ocean whitefish are not believed to be resident to California waters, based on catch patterns and the distribution of their eggs and larvae. The southern California population of ocean whitefish is thought to be derived from central and southern Baja California, Mexico (Leet et al. 1992).

During the period 1980 through 2001, the California sport catch of ocean whitefish ranged between 43,000 fish (1989) and 335,000 fish (1995). Estimates of the pounds of ocean whitefish taken annually by anglers averaged about 149,000 during the 1980s and 213,000 during the 1990s, making this species an important component of the sport catch (see graph below). Following the peak in sport caught ocean whitefish in 1995, catches ranged between 91,000 to 212,000 fish for the balance of the 1990s. The average size of sport caught ocean whitefish ranged from 1.87 pounds per fish (1983) to 0.75 pounds per fish (1993).

Commercial landings of ocean whitefish remained at less than 10,000 pounds during the period from 1981 through 1992, but increased to nearly 51,000 pounds during 1994. Commercial catches have since ranged downward from 31,000 pounds in 1996 to 8,756 pounds in 2000, about 5-15 percent of the sport take during recent years. Given the generally sustained sport catches of ocean whitefish in recent years, the cause of recent declines in commercial landings is uncertain, but may be related to changes in market demand and/or restrictions on associated shelf and nearshore fisheries.



Home Range Migratory Patterns:

Ocean whitefish are reported to range from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Peru and possibly Chile, and in the vicinity of the Galapagos Islands. Off California, ocean whitefish seldom occur north of Point Conception, Santa Barbara County. Ocean whitefish inhabit shallow waters over rocky-bottom and kelp-bed habitats from near the surface to a depth of 450 feet. Loosely aggregated schools of adults often are found at depths of 10 to 65 feet. Adults swim a few feet above the bottom, dropping down occasionally to the substrate to feed. Ocean whitefish are more abundant around offshore islands and banks than along the mainland coast.

Ocean whitefish are not known to be a migratory species. However, ocean whitefish eggs, larvae, and juveniles stages may be carried significant distances along the California and Baja California coasts by nearshore current systems. These currents carry the pelagic stages of ocean whitefish northward into areas where they are not normally resident, and may eventually produce outlying "colonies" of adult ocean whitefish. These fish may thrive and grow in the cooler northern waters, but their reproductive success may be greatly inhibited by the existing oceanic conditions.

Current Regulations:

There are no specific regulations for the commercial take of ocean whitefish. Ocean whitefish may not be taken or possessed while recreational fishing in waters 20 fathoms or greater in depth in the southern rockfish and lingcod management area during a southern rockfish and lingcod closure from November to January, and in waters 20 fathoms or greater in depth in the Cowcod Conservation Areas (two large areas south of Pt. Conception).

Ocean whitefish are governed by the general 10-fish daily bag and possession limit. All fillets shall be a minimum of six and one-half inches in length. Each fillet shall bear a one-inch square patch of skin. There is no recreational size limit.

How MPAs May Help:

Current information indicates that ocean whitefish do not sustain reproducing populations off California (reproduction occurs to the south of California). Resident adult ocean whitefish that do occur off California generally result from the transport of larvae and juveniles northward into our waters. No-take reserves would prohibit commercial and recreational ocean whitefish fisheries without the long-term benefit of helping to sustain a locally reproducing population of ocean whitefish. To the extent

that ocean whitefish are resident within a marine reserve, a prohibition on take would reduce fishing mortality on these fish. This, in turn, may result in enhanced growth of these fish in reserves, and allow for natural interactions with other locally reproducing species, but would not result in any expected enhancement of ocean whitefish production in local waters.